

The Role of Using Social Networking Sites to Achieve Competitive Advantage in the Tourism Companies in Afghanistan Botswana

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Best Citation – Mohammad Edris Abdurahim Zai, Asifullah Samim & Basira Sadat, The Role of Using Social Networking Sites to Achieve Competitive Advantage in the Tourism Companies in Afghanistan Botswana, *Journal on Vulnerable Community Development*, 1 (1) of 2023, Pg. 63-84, ISBN - 978-81-961097-0-7

Abstract

The internet has revolutionised the tourism destinations' business both as a source of information and as a sales channel. Visitors' reviews, photographs, videos, stories and recommendations, and online marketing bring destinations closer to potential visitors regardless of geographical location. The purpose of this study is to identify and assess the role of social networking sites in creating a competitive advantage for tourism companies in Afghanistan. Since social networking sites are used widely by all age groups in Afghanistan, assessing the role played by the said sites leaves vast room for future growth and development in the tourism sector of Afghanistan. The major focus will be on how social networking sites have successfully created a competitive advantage for tourism companies in Afghanistan. This research is based on secondary data collected from sources like; journals, magazines, company websites, annual reports, the internet, reports published by the ministry of tourism, books and journals related to the topic. The data analysis is conducted through content analysis as a qualitative technique. This research investigates the role of social network sites in placing tourism companies in giving tourism

companies a competitive edge in the tourism industry.

Keywords: Social Networking, social media, Tourism Companies, War Tourism

Introduction

This study investigates the use of social media by people in tourism promotion. The primary objective is to develop a framework on social media for tourism promotion in Afghanistan. Finally, the paper indicates the suggestions that Afghanistan requires to become an actual destination for tourism. The definition of urban tourism has initially been discussed, mainly because the definitions of urban tourism range from the downright abstruse to the straightforward. From all the definitions, it is concluded that urban areas are very important for this type of tourism because they are: Destinations in their own right, gateways for tourist entry, centres for accommodation, and ideal bases for excursions bringing the tourists along interesting cultural as well as natural itineraries. The discussion then evaluates the aspects of urban tourism by identifying trends, developments and challenges within the tourism sector in Afghanistan. The paper also discusses the key elements that can enhance visitor-friendliness in urban areas. It also considers new sector opportunities and

acknowledges the difficulties and challenges associated with the development of the city of as a centre for urban tourism. Bibliographic documentation and descriptive-analytic methods were used as a methodology for this paper to improve and deepen the knowledge to understand the concept of urban tourism thoroughly. From the main results of this research, it is found that the country has several attributes that will likely contribute to the continuing growth of its urban tourism sector, including an enormous array of cultural-heritage destinations, a well-developed transportation infrastructure and a hospitality sector that can accommodate budget-minded tourists as well as the needs of the most discriminating affluent travellers.

Competitive advantage was defined by Barney B.J. (1995) as being of "superior performance relative to other competitors in the same industry or superior performance relative to the industry average". It can mean anything that an organisation does better compared to its competitors. Most aspects could be considered a competitive edge, e.g. valuable resources such as brand reputation, higher profit margin or unique competence in producing a specific product or service.

Recent researches and studies show a dramatic change in customer behavior regarding communication. If twenty years ago, the telephone was the main mean of contact for most of the world, today communication moved into the online sphere, particularly on social media networks. In most businesses, strategic marketers have been the first movers in social media, tapping into it for insights into how consumers think and behave. As social technologies mature and organization's become convinced of their power, it is believed they will take on a broader role: informing competitive strategy. In particular, social media should help business companies to overcome some limits of old-school information gathering, which typically involves collecting information from a range of public and proprietary sources,

distilling insights using time-tested analytic methods, and creating reports for internal company clients. Today, many people who have expert knowledge and shape perceptions about markets are freely exchanging data and viewpoints through social platforms. By identifying and engaging these players, employing potent Web-focused analytics to draw strategic meaning from social-media data, and channeling this information to people within the organisation who need and want it, businesses can develop a "social intelligence" that is forward-looking, global in scope, and capable of playing out in real-time. This is not to suggest that "social" will entirely displace current methods of information gathering. Nevertheless, it should emerge as a strong complement.

A tourism destination is a natural entity which has in terms of unique tourism conditions and properties different from other destinations. Visitors develop an image about a destination as well as a set of expectations based on previous experience, word of mouth, press reports, advertising, and shared beliefs, before visiting a destination (Baloglu & Brinberg (1997), and Chon (1992). They form a paction of the destination through their reasoned and emotional interpretation (Konecnik, 2004; Kavoura and Bitsani, 2013). An attractive destination reflects the vvisito"feelings and opinions about the destination's ability to satisfy their needs and deliver individual benefits (Mayo & Jarvis, 1981). Today's visitors have many destinations to choose from but less time to make a buying decision. In order to be successfully promoted in the targeted markets, a destination must be favorably differentiated from its competitors. The development of information and communication technologies and their increasing use has radically changed the relationship between destinations and their visitors. The growing role of social media in tourism is undeniable; leveraging off social media to market destinations has proven to be an excellent strategy.

Review of Literature

Shwetasaibal Samantasahoo and Mukunda. B.G (2017) in their study stated that the use of the Internet and other information communication technologies leads to a new era of the tourism economy. Social media, as one of the most powerful online networking tools, has been integrated into a part of social and economic life in the real world. Wikipedia defines social media as the means of interaction among people in which they create share, exchange and comment on content among themselves in virtual communities and networks. It includes social networking sites, blogs, microblogs, consumer review sites, content community sites, wikis, internet forums and location-based social media. Social media has emerged as the new way in which people connect socially, by integrating information and communication technology (such as mobile and web-based technologies), social interaction, and the construction of words, pictures, videos and audio. In essence, it refers to an online environment built on people's contributions and interactions. The importance of social media is growing in the realm of the tourism industry. More researchers are undertaking studies in the areas of the impact of social media on the tourism industry. Social media proved to be a major communication vehicle that spread across the region. The tourism industry is one of the sectors that have benefited the most from the internet and as a result social media has become an integral part of any central or state tourism promotion and planning.

Florin Popescu and Ionela Claudia Alecsa (2015), in their study stated that with the advent of smartphones, the Internet has moved from desktop to pocket, hence a consistent growth in the number of people accessing social media. Particularly, teenagers and young adults overwhelming identify with social media. In the new economic normality in which we live, the internet and especially social media networks have been transformed from a tool to make friends to a more business oriented platform.

Member's (company's) interaction on social media could offer tremendous opportunities for entrepreneurs to develop competitive advantages in relation to other players in the market. Tourism is among the industries that are facing increasing challenges in a competitive environment, social media networks playing a significant role, not only allowing direct interaction between service providers and consumers but offering a window of service evaluation as-well. The main goals of this study are to show the opportunities offered by social media and to highlight that strategy aligned with social media can help Romanian rural tourism destinations to gain competitive advantages. The discussions and limitations are discussed at the end of the research.

Alzbeta Kiralova, and Antonin Pavlicecka (2015) mention that social media plays a significant role both on demand and on the supply side of tourism, allowing destinations to interact directly with visitors via various internet platforms and monitor and react to visitors' opinions and evaluations of services. The paper defines tourism destinations and characterises social media and communications in tourism. It summarizes the main characteristics of social media with implications for destination communication strategy, and it deals with changes in visitors' behaviour affecting destination marketing. The main objective of the paper is to show that strategies aligned with social media can help destinations to remain competitive. Selected best practices of social media campaigns are presented, and key elements of successful social media strategy are identified.

Hsu (2012) stated that social media usage is the warehouse for a big pool of customers; it is the store of customer information which acts as a means of giving out information to put together a market presence. The concept of social media usage has been developed and changed over time. (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010) stated that social media usage consisted of a group of internet-based tools that work on web

technology and ideological basis which help users to generate content and share it with other users. Based on the system-to-value sequence and downstream research perception, this study investigates social media usage's impact on organizational performance. Thus, this study extends previous research on social media usage comprising three variables: (SM for marketing, SM for customer relations and services, and SM for information accessibility).

According to the UNTWO Tourist Highlights report (2012), international tourist arrivals continued to increase by 4.6% reaching 983 million globally. Europe represents more than half the total of international tourist arrivals worldwide and was the fastest-growing region. Contrarily, due to the Arab Spring and political instability in the region, the Middle East and North Africa were the only sub regions that showed a decline in arrivals. Despite economic challenges in many markets, the estimate for international tourist receipts for 2011 is US\$ 1,030 billion worldwide, which represents an increase of 3.9% in real terms. According to the 2012 monthly and quarterly data in the *UNWTO World Tourism Barometer*, international tourist arrivals worldwide grew at a rate of 4% in the first three quarters of 2012, consolidating the growth trend that started in 2010.

According to Scott & Orlikowsky (2012), before online travel communities and travel ratings sites became popular, formal institutions, national tourist boards or travel guides had controlled the process of rating and ranking in the tourism industry, which was aligned with an internationally coordinated standards system. Reviews on Trip advisor reflected the travelers' personal opinions about their experience and can appear within a day of the hotel stay. Even though Trip advisor requires reviewers to rate the same categories (value, rooms, service, cleanliness and location), the meaning of the 'travelers rating' is subjective; what creates "value" for a certain traveler might not be the same to another.

According to Kietzmann et al. (2011), social media differ in terms of functionality and scope. There are sites for the general masses that are usually general social networking sites like Facebook, professional networks such as LinkedIn, media sharing sites like Youtube and Flickr, commerce communities similar to eBay, Amazon or Craigslist, Blogs, Social bookmarking sites such as Dig and del.icio.us, Microblogging sites like Twitter, forums and ratings and comments sites, collaborative websites and wikis similar to Wikipedia, location sites like Foursquare and many others.

According to the researcher, this functionality represents the degree to which users reveal their identities in social media. This includes, consciously or unconsciously, disclosing objective information such as name, age, gender, education, profession and so on, and subjective information like feelings, thoughts, likes, and dislikes.

Due to the fact that identity is essential to many social media platforms, there are some important implications for firms that seek to develop their own social media strategies for engaging with consumers. A significant implication is a privacy. Even though users disclose their identities in social media, they have concerns about how firms use their information as a source for data mining. Also, achieving a careful balance between user self-promotion and protecting privacy is crucial in selecting social media tools. Specifically, social media uses web-based technologies to create interactive platforms through which individual users and communities share, modify, discuss and co-create user-generated content.

According to Hanna et al. (2011), Social Media encourages participation and openness to users for companies to influence consumers. In addition, consumers actively influence brand messages as well. Hansen et al. (2011) mentioned that social media had created new ways of interacting with one another.

Parra-López et al., (2011) suggest that the intentions to use social media by tourists are influenced by the perceived benefits of use and by the costs involved in their use. This model also suggests that there are some variables, such as trust, altruism, access to technology and so on, that motivate and promote the use of social media when planning and taking trips. Online travel communities also offer essential psychological benefits to their users by making the community part of their lives. These benefits include a sense of belonging to a certain community, a sense of affiliation and the relationships between community members and can be attained as a result of ongoing communication in a collaborative environment.

According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), web 2.0 is a platform for the evolution of social media, which is "a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content".

Xiang and Gretzel (2010) state that social media plays an integral role in the tourism domain, representing approximately 11% of the search results of travel and tourism related searches in Google. The primary platforms for online tourists to share their experiences are virtual communities, consumer review sites and blogs.

Social media have numerous forms and types such as; blogs, microblogs, social networks, media-sharing sites, social bookmarking and voting sites, evaluation sites, forums, and virtual worlds (Zarella, 2010). Social media marketing is a procedure that let users to endorse their websites, products, or services through online social channels and be in touch with and to reach a large extent community that may not have been obtainable through traditional advertising channels (Weinberg, 2009). Moreover, Stileman (2009) and Mangold and Foulds (2009) agree that social media facilitate consumers to distribute information to their relatives and associates about the product and service brands. Social media marketing is more

honest in its communication with the customers, demanding to give you an idea about what the brand is by not controlling its image. Furthermore, Gordhamer (2009) stated that in these days, consumers are extra inelegant, knowledgeable and more complex, for that reason, organizations must be reachable and available at any time in each social media communication channel such as Facebook, Twitter, and Blogs. Weinberg, (2009) said that organizations must know how to use social media sites to force traffic to their business sites. Also, social media marketing can be categorized into two points: constant strategy and campaigns. Additionally, stated that "users of one kind of social media are likely to be users of other types; it makes sense to invite those who interact with you on Twitter to join your page on Facebook".

According to Corcoran (2009), the Social Media ecosystem can be divided into three types:

- a) Owned media is controlled by the company and includes the company's website.
- b) Paid media is bought by the company and includes sponsorships and advertising.
- c) Earned media is not controlled by the company and includes word-of-mouth.

According to Mangold and Foulds (2009), customers often seek to check social media sites to keep up with a brand's products and promotional campaigns. As well, customers believe that social media sites are a service channel where they can be capable of interrelating on real-time bases with the businesses. Scott (2009) stated that "The power of the Internet makes it easier for people to fall in love with you faster. But beware—it also makes it easier for them to fall out of love with you faster; it's a double-edged sword".

Mayfield (2008) follows the same type of reasoning and defines social media as the new types of online media that share various web 2.0 characteristics, such as:

Participation: social media distorts the line between media and audience by encouraging users to contribute and give feedback to whoever is interested.

- **Openness:** There are hardly any barriers to accessing content nowadays. Most of the Social Media sites and services are open to participation in the form of votes, comments and information sharing.

- **Conversation:** In contrast with traditional media is all about reach, so it focuses mainly on broadcast, social media can be defined as a two-way conversation.

- **Community:** social media allows different types of communities to form rapidly and to communicate in an effective manner.

- **Connectedness:** Most sites are connected to one another. There are often links connecting to other sites and online communities.

According to Buhalis & Law (2008), the Internet has redesigned the way information related to travel and tourism is distributed and the way that tourists plan their trips. Recently, two main trends which emphasize changes that can impact the tourism system, have emerged on the Internet. Firstly, Social Media websites have gained popularity in the tourists' use of the Internet. These Social Media sites help users in sharing and posting their travel-related experiences, comments and opinions that, in turn, serve as an information source for tourists around the world. With this, consumers earn more power in determining the production and delivery of information due to the widespread access to the Internet. Secondly, due to a large amount of information available, searching has gradually become a dominant mode in tourists' Internet use. Hence, search engines have become a potent interface for access to travel-related information and play a critical role in joining tourists and tourism firms.

According to Garretson (2008), consumers no longer use social media solely to research, but to engage with companies, by giving their

opinions and feedback. For that reason, the new social media-driven business model is defined by customer connectivity and interactivity. Here, content and technology are interconnected in producing widespread effects for how brands and companies influence customers.

According to Gay et al. (2007), taking into account the expectations and perceptions of these potential customers is inevitable. This means that the content of a website needs to be informative, creative and exciting. The design and functionality need to go beyond the static nature of early attempts. Interactivity and functionalities need to be able to offer a rich range of interactivity in order to generate sales and revenues. For tourism operators, it is necessary for businesses to provide interactivity which meets a diverse range of potential customers to enable them to search and select their choice. This should involve processes through to including online booking facilities on their website. This assures that the pulling content of the website that attracts website visitors can lead to an actual profit by turning the visitor into a paying customer.

Global Alliance Intelligence (2006) considered business competitive intelligence as a systematic and ongoing process which includes all activities regarding collection, analysis, communication and use of information about innovation, customers, distribution channels, competitors, technology, macroeconomic and political issues to increase the competitiveness of organizations and to help in the decision process.

Wang and Fesenmaier (2004) stated that members of an online community seek functional benefits when they go online to fulfil specific needs and activities, such as finding information for their trips; for that reason, the relationship between these types of benefits and the use of social media is fundamental to define the use of social media when planning and taking trips. These benefits include the support for collecting relevant information to simplify the decision-making process, together

with the efficiency and convenience of online travel communities, where users can access information without temporal or geographical constraints. People join online travel communities for entertainment and for their own enjoyment. These benefits include being entertained, happy and amused, having fun, seeking enjoyment, and other positive feelings. According to Zhou (2004), in many businesses in an online world, establishing a website often represents the first contact with online marketing and the website of a business is often its most powerful online marketing tool as it creates awareness. Moreover, it allows the business to present itself as well as its products and services to potential customers. Particularly for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), this provides a chance to overcome geographical barriers, market and budget limitations. However, the main objective of a commercial website is the generation of sales and revenues. Therefore, it is important to consider one's web presence from the point of view of a website visitor.

Wang et al. (2002) states that the tendency of travelers to use Social Media in planning and taking trips is related to their perceived benefits of the usage of Social Media in that situation. Even though the benefits of using technologies when planning and taking trips are dynamic, and due to the fact that the process of identifying them is complex because of the large variety of travelers' characteristics, it is considered that four main benefits are essential for tourists to have positive prospects of using social media: functional, social, psychological and hedonic benefits. Online travel communities are structured socially and provide social benefits (Wang et al., 2002). These benefits include communication with other tourists, the exchange of opinions, the building of relationships with other tourists and the user's involvement in the information exchange and the trust in the community.

Walther (1996) opined that Internet users progress from collecting information without

having any social interaction to increasing social activities as their involvement in online communities expands.

According to Klein & Leffler (1981), if only a small number of competing firms in the same industry have a positive reputation, then this is a rare resource. A positive reputation can result from informal social relationships between companies and key stakeholders that are socially complex and usually depend on particular historical settings that are difficult to duplicate. In any of these cases, a positive reputation is inimitable. There is no proven substitute for a firm's positive reputation. Hence, it is non-substitutable and can consequently be a source of a sustainable competitive advantage.

Background of the study

In the contemporary economic arena, the tourism sector has become a significant driver of social, technological and economic development (Dwyer and Ki, (2003). Statistics show that one in every eleven jobs in the world is in travel and tourism (Christie et al, 2014). The sector is mainly acknowledged for benefitting women and young people and thereby poverty alleviation, Gomezelj and Mihali (2008).

However, to harness the full potential of the tourism sector, businesses have to enhance competitiveness by involving multiple players for a delivery of the best services (Dwyer, Forsyth and Rao, 2000). Service and product delivery in the tourism sector involves the engagement of multiple stakeholders in order to give a memorable experience. Diverse goals of service providers, destination goals and the uniqueness of tourist's interest can be observed as they come from different background and corners of the world which makes it difficult to manage destination competitiveness (Crouch, 2011). The dynamics and complexity of the sector therefore requires an ongoing study of destination competitiveness Namhyun (2012). Through the paradigms of ongoing debates,

tourism companies must devise strategies to create competitive advantage using social networking sites.

Despite the evolvement on different models, there are fostered debates on comprehensiveness of indicators, the question of practicalities, their policy relevance, measurability, data comparability, time and place variance, and rankings of attributes.

1.8 Conceptual Framework of the study

have crucial impact in management strategy. In a world characterized by rapid changes and uncertainties, monitoring internal and external events has become paramount to business success. Therefore, knowledge gained from information accumulated from social media networks is of great importance due to its capacity to provide a complete analysis of the situation on customer trends and market changes.

The business competitive intelligence is a

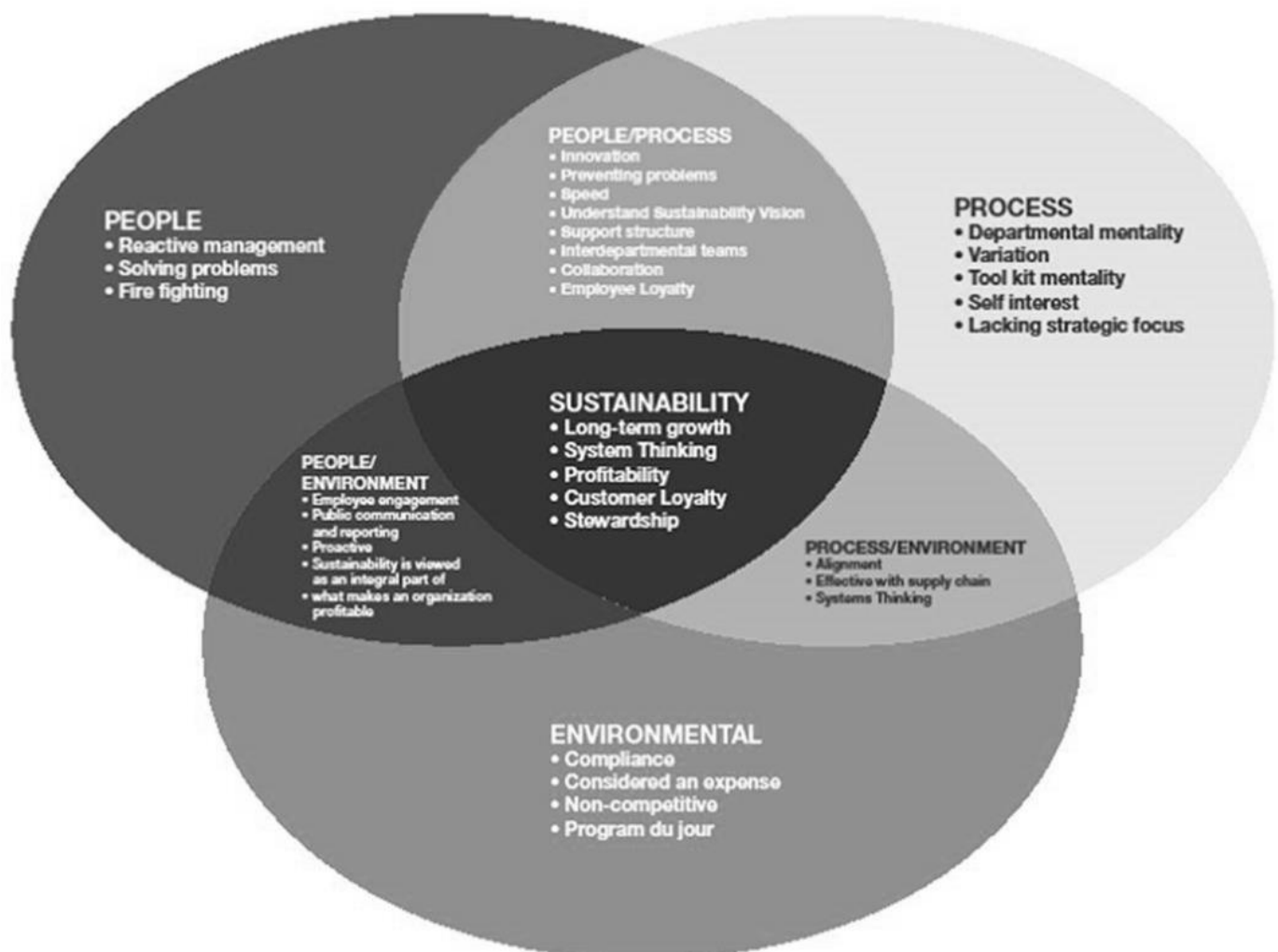


Figure 1.2: Conceptual Framework

Competitive advantage and social media networks

It is implied that stable and predictable markets are memories of the past and therefore one has to focus on monitoring the events and changes in the markets. Factors, such as globalization and the explosion of technological innovation

systematic and ongoing process which includes all activities regarding collection, analysis, communication and use of information about innovation, customers, distribution channels, competitors, technology, macroeconomic and political issues in order to increase the competitiveness of organizations and to help in the decision process. (Global Alliance Intelligence, 2006).

The success in exploiting opportunities requires the acquisition of sufficient knowledge on the economic trends, competitors, customers, suppliers and other external factors through their continuous monitoring in order to assess changes that may represent opportunities and tapping into them.

The objective should be managing emerging opportunities and risks in a proactive manner, so as to obtain a competitive advantage to gain pro active performance. Competitive intelligence software based on information gathered from social media networks aims to identify signs and trends that can make the difference in exploiting new opportunities and emerging risks.

Social media networks had tremendous growth in recent years. Facebook, Myspace, Twitter, Trip Advisor etc. were recently dominated by teenagers and young adults. Meanwhile, many parents who wanted to monitor their children's activity joined social media networks. The number of Facebook users worldwide had reached at 2.32 billion at the end of 2018. In 2018, more than half of the world's population is a member of social media network. It is estimated that in 2018, the number of social media users were 2.77 billion. According to Stikky Media (2018) in 2017 nearly more than 90 million persons downloaded application TripAdvisor, with no less than 2.6 billion monthly users.

In order to be credible in online interaction it is necessary to build a solid media profile. A visible profile on social media networks is dependent upon the level of participation. This implies that the business and projects must invest the necessary resources to become a regular contributor to social media.

Active participation represents another important factor in building a successful social media profile. The more the company participates the presence of the brand will increase. Participation should be a strategic one, so as to disseminate the message to make more credible. After all, active participation

means regular and continuous participation, mutual reciprocity being a normal part of human relations.

A successful social media profile requires openness to feedback; it contributes to effective communication, another important factor in developing social media profiles. Analysis of feedback from social media helps to learn more about possible errors done in the past, and which represent lessons learned for the future. Getting easily into contact with other users (customers, competitors etc.) of social media networks and even outside of them is an important tool for competitive intelligence, making them informers.

Time and effort must be invested to build respect, discussing common topics with other users in order to create a network of informers, to finally help in gaining competitive advantages.

1.3 social media and tourism business strategy

a. Insights into customers: Businesses might have had a superficial understanding of their customers before, but at present businesses must have a deeper understanding of them and of what truly motivates them. The intelligence gathered from social media can offer reliable and useful information for the businesses.

b. Developing the service/product: Businesses can use the intelligence gathered from social media to improve their products and/or services. The intelligence will help business to do that and there is no better way to gain that knowledge than listening to the customers.

c. Performing competitive analyses: Advanced intelligence from social media is a wonderful and effective tool for gathering the results of competitive analyses. It is critical for businesses to gain insight on their competition regarding the behavior of customers, the way the products/services are being used, and much more valuable information. If businesses can

really get inside the heads of competitors, they can beat them.

d. Understanding the customers: It is critical that businesses view the customers as human beings. Businesses should make a point of learning about what they like and don't like (not just on a professional level), should learn about their hobbies, interests and their points of view on all sorts of things.

1.4 Tourism Destination

Destinations are traditionally defined as territories, geographical areas, such as a country, an island or town (Davidson & Maitland, 2000), with political and legislative framework for tourism marketing and planning. Destinations are places towards which people travel and where they choose to stay for a certain period (Leiper, 1995) and can be recognized as a perceptual concept, interpreted subjectively by visitors, where a combination of all products, services and experiences are provided locally (Buhalis, 2000). Destinations are also considered as geographical region understood by visitors as a unique entity where facilities and services are designed to meet the needs of the visitors (Cooper, Fletcher, Gilbert, Shepherd & Wanhill, 1998). Tourism products are purchased in advance prior to their use and away from the point of consumption. Visitors, therefore, must rely on descriptions provided by destinations. From this point of view is timely and accurate information, relevant to visitor's needs (Buhalis, 1998) crucial to visitors' satisfaction and destination's competitiveness. Destinations offer an integrated experience to the visitor; the purchase of the tourism product is accompanied by increased levels of emotional and irrational factors, emphasis on the word-of-mouth advertising, and increased demands on its uniqueness. Destinations' visitors, therefore, trust the opinions of family and friends more than others and are more cautious to approaches of traditional mass advertising market (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008). Potential visitors have choice of many

competing destinations and are not willing thoroughly extract information and waste time by shopping. On the other hand, they are often willing to pay more for a quality product when it is easily accessible. Social media created a great opportunity to develop and maintain relationships with busy customers (Yadav & Arora, 2012). Globalization and changes of visitors' needs and attitudes have increased the volume of information that destinations have to analyse in order to stay competitive in a continuously changing tourism market. Social media as a tool of tourism marketing can greatly enhance the destination's reputation and more and more convinced estimations' marketers that they are an integral part of the marketing strategies. Werthner and Ricci (2004) state that tourism is an industry that is at the forefront of internet use and online transactions. Social media have taken tourism and travel booking experiences to a new level. They enable to visitors communicate with not only the destinations but also with visitors who have recently experienced the destination they are considering to visit. Using social media visitors can gather information first-hand from other visitors and make decisions about the destination or the experience. Information gathering is possible through blogging, experience sharing; story writing that can be published on personal internet site of visitors, the destination's site, or a networked site. The content of blogs, stories, etc. is generated mainly by visitors who have experienced the destination, so that the information is based on opinion and perceived authentic experience. Recommendation platforms specializing on tourism such as asgogobot.com, trippy.com, wanderfly.com, tripit.com, tripwolf.com, tripadvisor.com, and online content is one of the most important sources of information in tourism.

1.5 Social Media Strategy

Social media allow destinations to contact visitors at relatively low cost and higher levels of efficiency that can be achieved with more

traditional communication tools (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). If the destination wants to enforce on the highly competitive global tourism market, it must be distinguishable from the competition (Porter, 1996). The destination will be successfully discernible with a well-developed communications strategy with the focus on social media. Since the social media are overcrowded and oversaturated with information, it is very difficult to attract attention – however some schemes seem to work better than others: novelty, chance to win, celebrity involvement, uniqueness, unexpectedness, competition, consonance or interesting graphical design.

Graham (2005), states that social media are anything where users can participate, create, and share content. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) distinguish the following social media: blogs, content communities, social networking sites, virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds. Social media also include forums, ratings, reviews, social networking sites, micro-blogging sites, pod-casts and video-casts and photo sharing sites (FPRM, 2009). The increased use and changes in technology hand in hand with the decrease of marketing budgets are forcing destinations to innovate their communications strategies as well. More and more destinations shift their traditional communications strategy based on radio, television, printed media and others towards internet and social media. The communications strategy is designed to help to destination communicate effectively. It can help destination increase awareness of the destination, achieve global publicity, strengthen the destination image as a favorite destination, target specific market, ensure understanding of what the destination does, change behavior and perceptions where necessary, support the brand, increase the visitation numbers in social media channels.

The ongoing development in communication means including social media sites of different types to achieve the objectives of business organizations. Moreover, the presence of many

applications in social media has contributed to changing the conventional methods in marketing and tourism.

The effects of social media sites on tourists include the following:

1. Providing the needed information to tourists about the touristic sites.
2. Benefitting from guiding the client as a positive consumer to the service.
3. Providing the tourist with safe channels to buy and book different trips.
4. Helping in disseminating specific information about the trips and the changes that might occur.

It is clear that tourism companies and agents have benefitted from social media in providing specific information about trips, prices, and the offered services in an attractive and developed manner. In addition, these companies perceive the customers as an essential factor in encouraging tourism, and they benefit from them by providing sufficient information about the tourism sites through social media. The communication taking place between the travelers might improve the nature of the provided tourism trips. Social media sites are used to encourage tourism.

1.6 Specifications of Social Media Networks



Figure 1.1: Key social platforms

Source: Universal McCann 2016

The most important key platform is the social networks that can be classified as websites or

applications where people gather together and be social. The social networking sites aim to bring people together and offer a place where conversation can take place between people with no space and time limitations (Safko & Brake 2009). Social networks are based on human interaction taking the conversation online. In social networks, people connect with their peers, transfer and obtain information and help each other. Popular examples of social networks are Facebook and MySpace.

Information Efficiency

Al-Hothafie (2003) identified efficiency as the ability to acquire a group of knowledge, experiences, and skills, form attitudes, and help individuals to perform their task at a specific level of accuracy. The efficiencies known by the individual are represented in:

1. Efficiencies related to computing culture.
2. Efficiencies related to computer use.
3. Efficiencies related to information culture.
4. Efficiencies related to dealing with global web programmers and services (Al-Zyadat et al., 2010).

It can be seen that the availability of sufficient information through social media networks to individuals in terms of tourism is an important factor in encouraging tourism and the individual decision to go to different touristic sites to attain entertainment, treatment, and other purposes.

Information Accuracy

Information accuracy is identified as information free from errors since information accuracy contributes to the decision's quality and avoids the wrong decisions, thus reducing cost and wasting less time (Al-Zyadat et al., 2010). The researcher observes that information accuracy has a significant role in making the decisions and less degree is dependent on the institution, guess, and experiment, while putting the focus on logical and scientific methods gains greater benefits in increasing the decision

effectiveness. Also, accurate information creates trust in the tourists to adopt what is present on social media about the tourist sites, then adopting the purchase decision.

Ease of Use

Ease of use is identified as using and employing information easily to make a decision (Yaghir, 2010). Social media networks are characterized by ease of use because they provide the techniques, language, and influences to provide the needed information about multiple issues.

The following questions have been raised:

1. What is the role of social media networks in providing better services and discounts to customers in tourism companies in Afghanistan?
2. What is the role of social networking sites in creating a competitive advantage among tourism companies in Afghanistan?
3. Do social networking sites play a role in the organisational performance of tourism companies in Afghanistan?
4. What is the role of market changes, trends, and technology in creating a competitive advantage for tourism companies in Afghanistan?

Objectives of the Study:

The objective of this study is to examine and analyse the role of social networking sites in creating a competitive advantage for tourism companies in Afghanistan in order to facilitate the companies with a constructional framework for providing better tourism services. The main objectives of this research are:

1. To study the level of consumer awareness of social networking sites.
2. To determine the level of usage of social networking sites to gather information about tourism companies.
3. To find the most widely used social media tool used to know or avail the

services provided by tourism companies in Afghanistan.

4. To determine how social networking sites have created a competitive advantage among tourism companies in Afghanistan.
5. To determine the increase in the level of organizational performance in tourism companies by marketing on social networking sites.
6. To determine and generate strategies which will assist tourism companies in Afghanistan develop effective ways to use social networking sites for tourism promotion.

3.1.3 Hypothesis:

In the background of the objectives of the study, the following hypotheses have been identified:

- H_1 - There is an association between social networking sites and competitive advantage in tourism companies of Afghanistan.

H_0 - There is no association between social networking sites and competitive advantage in tourism companies of Afghanistan.

- H_2 - There is an association between social networking sites and the organizational performance of tourism companies in Afghanistan.

H_0 - There is no association between social networking sites and the organizational performance of tourism companies in Afghanistan.

- H_3 - There is an association between better services, affordable prices and offers and discounts and competitive advantage in tourism companies of Afghanistan.

H_0 - There is no association between better services, affordable prices and offers and

discounts and competitive advantage in tourism companies of Afghanistan.

- H_4 -There is an association between effective online presence and competitive advantage in tourism companies of Afghanistan.

H_0 - There is no association between an effective online presence and competitive advantage in the tourism companies of Afghanistan.

- H_5 -There is an association between the implementation of new media strategies and technologies and the survival of tourism companies in Afghanistan.

H_0 - There is no association between the implementation of new media strategies and technologies and survival in tourism companies of Afghanistan.

- H_6 -There is an association between market changes and market trends and competitive advantage in tourism companies of Afghanistan.

H_0 - There is no association between market changes and market trends and competitive advantage in tourism companies of Afghanistan.

Research Methodology

The research shall be based on secondary data. The secondary data will be obtained from research papers, Journals, magazines and websites.

Research Problem

The specific purpose of the study is to identify and assess the role of social networking sites in creating a competitive advantage in tourism companies of Afghanistan and Botswana. Since social networking sites are used widely by all age groups in Afghanistan, assessing the role played by the said sites leaves a vast room for future growth and development in the tourism sector of Afghanistan. Mean while in Botswana, majority of social media users are the prime

working aged between 25-54 according to Statistics Botswana. The major focus will be on how the social networking sites have been successful in creating a competitive advantage in the tourism companies in Afghanistan and Botswana.

3.1.4 Significance of the study:

With increasing market competition and changing environment, there is a need for organizations to quickly adapt and adjust in a proficient way to gain a competitive advantage upon other competitors and to enhance organizational performance. Marketing in this industry generally focuses on providing affordable or discounted travel to their customers. Social media usage, such as websites, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts, are not well structured and are not frequently updated to attract new customers in by companies in Afghanistan and Botswana. Therefore, the researcher aims to find out the role of social networking sites in creating a competitive advantage in tourism companies in both countries in question.

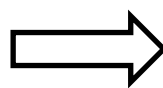
3.1.5 Scope of the study

The scope of the study is confined to Afghanistan and Botswana in Tourism i.e., the Department of Tourism, Government of Afghanistan and Botswana and how social networking sites create a competitive advantage in the tourism industries. The study investigates how influential social media is in promoting the tourism industry in the two countries and the role social networking sites play in creating a competitive advantage in tourism companies. Both independent and dependent factors with respect to competitive advantage and related literature in Afghanistan and Botswana are employed to quantify this study. The study is expected to ascertain the role played by social networking sites in creating a competitive advantage for tourism companies in Afghanistan and Botswana. This is a comprehensive study of selected tourism companies to give context to devise and implement probable effective strategies in both countries.

Variables used for the study

Independent Variables

- Affordable prices
- Better services (Food, accommodation, spatial places)
- Interaction abilities
- Human resources
- Technology and Information Technology
- Online presence
- Offers and discounts
- Advertising through Social Networking sites (Facebook, Trip Advisor, etc)
- Market changes and customer trends
- Efficiency and accuracy of information about the company and tour offers



Dependent Variables

Competitive Advantage in tourism companies

3.2.5 Limitations of the Study:

The study is limited to tourism companies in Afghanistan and Botswana. The scope of research cannot be made wider by covering all the commercial sectors in the two countries. The sample size is smaller compared to the whole country in Afghanistan. The sample size is at medium capacity for Botswana as it would be difficult for the researcher to collect primary data without following proper legal steps to acquire a research permit when in a foreign country. Also, collecting data from all the selected companies and customers and integrating them to draw an interpretation of the role of social networking sites in creating a competitive advantage would be very tedious in order to get more accurate results. Time constraint is also one of the main limitations of the research. Better results can be obtained if sufficient time is invested in conducting the research.

AFGHANISTAN

Afghanistan now has the opportunity to do its best to grow the tourism sector in the wake of the country's protracted wars. Tourism-related revenue will be a substantial source of national income and a major source of funding for the country's local economies. The government authorities are eager to strongly support any investments made in this sector by the private sector. Afghanistan has the ability to capitalize on the tourism sector. The quality of life of Afghan's may improve when tourism increases in the country. Growth in other industries will be driven by tourism development.

Strengths:

Afghanistan offers a variety of alternatives for travellers, including ecotourism and tourist destinations, a pleasant climate (the Mediterranean climate), and a prime location in the centre of Asia.

Weakness:

Lack of an independent department in the tourism sector in Afghanistan, which is one of

the important issues in the field of tourism in the country, and lack of coordination between the relevant departments.

Opportunities:

One of the finest chances for luring tourists is Afghanistan's position in the centre of Asia and its function as a link between North and South and East and West.

Threats:

Currently, the biggest threat not only in Afghanistan but all over the world is terrorist attacks, kidnapping, and abduction, which is the biggest threat in the tourism sector.

Tourism Policies and Strategies

approval of the licencing policy for travel agencies.

i. A plan for finding housing, learning about visas, and finding investing opportunities.

ii. Through close collaboration with regional, national, and international tourist organisations, the government is responsible for overseeing the execution of tourism policies and initiatives.

The government of Afghanistan aggressively urges private sectors to invest in the tourist industry and provides full support in doing so.

The Afghan tourist industry has a lot of potential to be profitable as global tourism keeps growing. In the last two years, 1500 travel agencies received licences, and 44 thousand individuals were hired in the tourism sector.

To improve the country's tourist infrastructure for visitors, more than 120 hotels and guest homes were constructed and granted licences.

Afghanistan's natural surroundings include a huge landscape that contains stunning mountain ranges and lovely lakes. Due to its geographical location between the east and the west, as well as the rich diversity in ethnicity and cultural traditions that Afghanistan history has been steeped in, Afghanistan also boasts a rich cultural legacy.

Planning:

The tourist area and its potential extensions must be considered while planning, managing, and developing the industry.

Marketing:

The best use of tourist and historical regions to comprehend and enjoy it to be has less to do with the advertising and information in the tourism business than it does with a deep understanding of people.

Development

The development of provinces should strengthen environmental conservation and recreational goals. For instance, it can be a better use of historical sites to bolster farmers' incomes and significant land with desolate land reclamation and create new opportunities for access to the province to be achieved.

Economic development

When done right, tourism may contribute to the economic and social advancement of a nation. The tourism sector generates new chances for direct and indirect employment, opens up new markets for the sale of industrial goods, boosts revenue, and has the potential to stop economic development from migrating while also enhancing people's quality of life.

Findings

Studies in the past have demonstrated the importance of social media usage (Altamimi, 2012) and recommended that companies use social media more professionally and build up their marketing channels to meet customers' various needs. Previous studies have stated the positive impact of internet usage on organisations in various dimensions, such as enhancing CRM practices and improving export marketing performance (Lu and Julian, 2007). However, the role of social networking sites in creating a competitive advantage for tourism companies was not empirically studied in Afghanistan.

1. The tourism companies in Afghanistan provide the best offers and discounts to customers.
2. The tourism companies in Afghanistan consider social media as an effective tool to market their companies.
3. The tourism companies in Afghanistan optimally advertise the services they offer on social media.
4. The human resources employed in tourism companies in Afghanistan are not well trained to provide optimal services to the customers who avail services from the tourism companies.
5. Advertising through social networking sites has successfully created a competitive advantage for tourism companies in Afghanistan.
6. The tourism companies in Afghanistan have provided accurate information about the services they provide on respective social networking sites and websites.

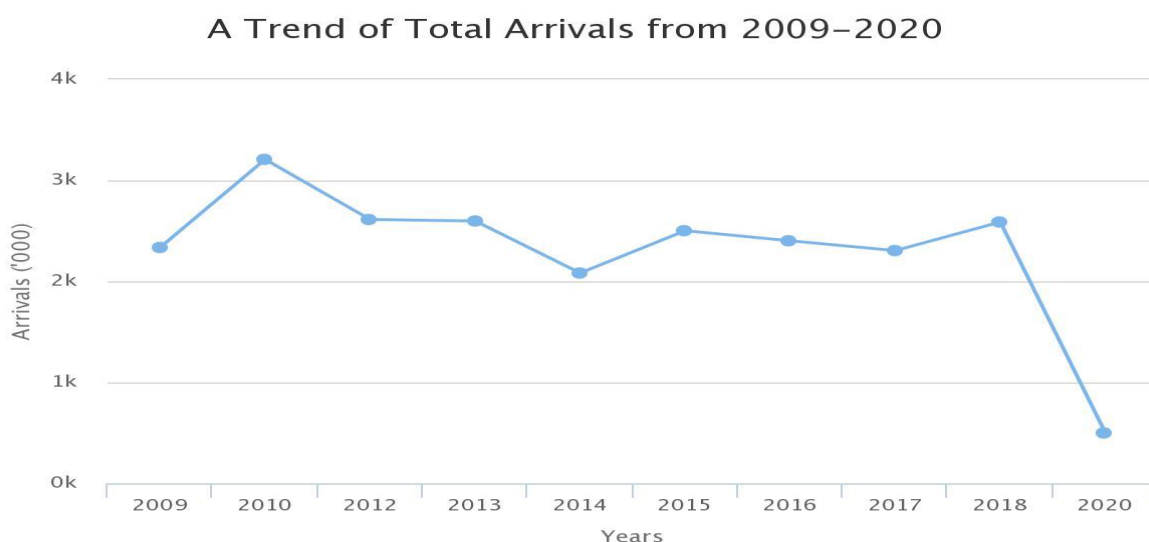
Discussion: Botswana

The Republic of Botswana is a land-locked country in Southern Africa. Botswana's main attractions are its game reserves where there is seasonal hunting of wild animals including a photographic safari. The country relies on tourism second to natural resource and typically has a growing number of tourist activities as well as tourism opportunities. However, since the hit of COVID-19, the country has experienced a steep decline in outbound tourism which reflected badly on the country's GDP per capita (Dailynews, 2022). According to statistics Botswana, tourism statistics have been inconsistent since 2009 with the highest pick in total tourism arrivals in 2010. From Then, the country took the biggest dive from 2018 to 2020 with the number of tourist arrivals falling from a little over 2K in 2018 to below 1K arrivals in 2020. Table 1 below has no year 2019 because the country shut its borders and airports due to the outbreak of Covid-19 which lead to extensive travel restrictions in the country. Table

Y axis represents number of arrivals in thousand, x axis represents the years. In essence, the nation made a loss in terms of outbound tourism. However, after the covid 19 situation stabilized, inbound tourism became functional with the help of social networking sites like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. Most companies harnessed their knowledge of social media by employing digital marketing professionals in order to remain competitive and relevant in the market (Jan Zimmerman and Doug Sahlin, 2011)

Table 1

Figure I- Source: Botswana Government



Statistics, 2020

Tourism explored social networks by engaging social media influencers. Furthermore, social networks like Facebook can be credited with fanning competitive advantage in local business. Lars Kamar (2022) listed that around 1.1 million people in Botswana used Facebook in Botswana as of January 2022 with LinkedIn coming second with a total number of 300,000 members and Instagram at 176,100 users. This makes the overall total number of social media users in Botswana roughly 50 percent of the country's population. The author found no available accurate data detailing number of

tourism business with a social network presence placing them at a competitive advantage in the tourism industry.

In a nutshell, Botswana and Afghanistan are different in terms of geographical location, cultural variation, political status, and economic situation, the study relied on common goal called tourism for economic development and inviting visitors to its tourist attraction landscapes in Afghanistan and wildlife in Botswana. Common among the two countries is they both have functional social networks and internet that is easily accessible to consumers in the outbound and inbound market. When used properly, knowledge gained from the data they gather can be used to give the tourism

industry a competitive edge. The social media spreads news like wild fire i.e the national geographic channel (NG). It has no boundaries and it allots easy exposure regardless of geographical location. Information is made available at fingertips. Global dissemination of data and information using social networks has the capacity to place tourism companies in the lime light.

Afghanistan

Afghanistan is a landlocked country located in South-Central Asia and surrounded by beautiful mountains. Despite the country's ongoing war, its tourism sector still thrives. According to Forouzan Rezaei *et al.* (2011), a company needs

to balance its technology systems with its social systems in order to maintain a long-term competitive advantage. Social networking sites have become an anchor for tourism in Afghanistan. Tourists have begun to explore what Willem Van De Velde calls war tourism. According to Bertram. M Gordon (2020) war tourism is travelling to war struck areas for recreation purposes.

In spite of the war in Afghanistan, tourists across the globe travel to visit historical, cultural and religious monuments affected by the war and document their visits using social media networks. YouTube in particular is the main stream where tourists publish their documented tourism ventures. Below are 3 YouTube links that put more emphasis on this statement.

1. <https://youtu.be/e8NipEf2MFE>
2. <https://youtu.be/gOChk-crMQM>
3. <https://youtu.be/nculZ8xulwc>

A common aspect between these YouTube videos is they belong to the owners and tourism business are not involved which means it is free publicity. Therefore, social networks bring free flow of information and digital globalization that place tourism business in a competitive space. YouTube Link number (1) indicates that broadcasting media like BBC News also play a huge role in enhancing business competitiveness through airing journeys of tourists aiming to show the rich indigenous culinary culture of Afghanistan in an attempt to spread positivity and hence attract new consumers. Social network sites give users the comfort of confidence and ability to read customer reviews about concerned areas and feedback is also gained. Understanding and knowing how to tap into social networks helps to facilitate sharing of experience, knowledge sharing and influences consumer travel decisions making (Decrop and Shelders, 2005). Social networking sites are an effective way to disseminate information. According to Woodside and MacDonald (1994) and Plank A. (2016), choices made by leisure tourists are

related to destination, accommodation, activities, attractions, travel modes/routes, and dining options. This means tourism businesses in Afghanistan can utilise social networks by collaborating with tourists actively on social media and by creating business websites as a direct link to the companies. An increase in tourist visitations would mean an increase in employment for the betterment of local communities.

Conclusion

Social networking sites and applications enable connections, communication, information sharing, and the development of relationships between individuals and groups. Individuals can connect with neighbours, relatives, friends, and people who share their interests. One of the most significant uses of the internet nowadays is social networking. People may maintain social ties, keep informed, and access as well as share a variety of information thanks to well-known social networking sites like Facebook, Yelp, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok. Also, these websites let advertisers connect with their target markets. Since the debut of the first social networking site, SixDegrees.com, in 1997, social networking sites have advanced significantly. Modern society is quickly embracing newer social networking sites. Addiction to social media is increasingly widespread. If they don't check their social media accounts frequently, people may start to experience worry or may obsessively do so. Social media posts are likewise carefully regulated; users only share positive events that happen to them. The spectator may develop a distorted perception of reality as a result, believing that others lead more fulfilling lives than they do. This results in FOMO, or the fear of missing out on social activities.

When someone posts on social media with the goal to hurt someone else, it is known as cyberbullying. Sending offensive messages or publishing someone else's private information online are examples of this. Sadly, some people's suicides have been influenced by

cyberbullying. That is currently a significant issue.

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